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INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0804  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0760  
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI PRIORITY 0253  
RHMFSS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/CJCS WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHEFSNG/HMSNG WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFSS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000838

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA, S/CT, DS/IP/NEA, DS/DSS/CC, CA/OCS  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO/MCDERMOTT  
LONDON FOR  
PARIS FOR NOBLES

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/03/2029

TAGS: PTER ASEC PGOV PREL IR SY

SUBJECT: BUS EXPLOSION IN HEART OF SHI,A DISTRICT OF  
DAMASCUS

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Classified By: CDA Andre Goodfriend, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: At approximately 1020 local, media and other Embassy contacts reported an explosion on or near a bus carrying Iranian pilgrims in the Sayida al-Zainab district of Damascus. Sources at the scene indicated there were roughly a dozen casualties. Press accounts suggested several plausible explanations for the explosion, including a traffic accident, a bomb, and a cooking incident that set off a propane tank. Several press reports noted the visit to Damascus of Iranian National Security Advisor Jalili, who went to Sayida al-Zainab after the incident. The Minister of Interior issued a press statement around 1230 local stating terrorism was not a factor in the explosion. Rather, he said, three people had died in an explosion after a mishap in an attempt to repair one of the bus's tires. The Norwegian Ambassador, who spoke with the Minister on the scene, clarified that the Minister told him a faulty air compressor may have blown up as the driver was attempting to put air in a rear tire. Embassy security elements remain on alert and the Consular Section issued a Warden Message advising Americans to avoid the area. An EAC assessed there was no immediate threat to the Embassy or personnel; a subsequent EAC will provide an updated assessment septel. End Summary.

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What Happened?  
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¶2. (C) At approximately 1020 local, Embassy sources reported an explosion on or near a bus in front of a gas station in the Sayida al-Zainab suburb of Damascus. The incident occurred close to the Imam al-Khomani hospital, not far from the Sayida al-Zainab shrine, built in honor of the Prophet Mohammed's granddaughter and host to some 2,000,000 Shia pilgrims annually.

¶3. (C) Press accounts suggested several plausible explanations for the explosion, including a collision between the bus and a car, a bomb, and a cooking incident. An NGO

contact who runs a clinic for Iraqi refugees in the area reported his staff had received word from the police that the bus had exploded after a collision with a smaller car. A press contact on the scene told us he had heard from several eye witnesses that the explosion had been a "big one." Embassy staff who visited the site observed blown out windows in the hospital next door to the gas station, as well as damage to an electrical tower near where the bus was parked. The explosion also shattered store-front windows as far as 200 meters away. Photos of the bus show significant damage to the engine casing, located at the rear of the bus. Embassy staff reported, however, the engine block was largely intact, though charred. Additionally, the explosion apparently blew out the bus's front windshield and shattered many of the windows. Several individuals on the site told Emboffs there had been a signal large explosion, but none of them used the word "bomb" or characterize it as an attack.

¶4. (C) The official Syrian version emerged at roughly 1230 local, when Syrian Minister of Interior Saeed Samur told the Syrian News Agency (SANA) that "terrorism was not a factor" in the explosion. Samur explained that three people had died after a mishap caused by an explosion related to an attempt to repair one of the bus's tires. The driver and two gas station attendants died and four others had been injured, he said. Emboffs spoke to officials at Imam al-Khomani hospital and learned "three or four" bodies were brought in.

¶5. (C) Roughly 30 minutes before the Interior Minister's statement, the Norwegian Ambassador called us from the scene and said the entire area had been cordoned off, though some traffic was getting through. Soldiers and police were trying to gather evidence, and bomb dogs were sniffing for signs of explosives. According to the Norwegian Ambassador, the

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Interior Minister had claimed the explosion occurred during the bus driver's attempt to put air into a rear tire. The bus, empty at the time of the explosion, showed signs of damage, particularly in the rear, but it remained intact. The Ambassador later clarified to us that the Minister indicated an air compressor may have malfunctioned and triggered the explosion. Emboffs who photographed the bus being towed said that all tires appeared intact. (Note: Post is sending photos to DS electronically.)

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Embassy Actions  
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¶6. (C) RSO alerted all embassy security elements (local guard force, surveillance detection, and Marine Security Guard) and SARG police and security services providing perimeter security for embassy facilities. RSO also accounted for all embassy personnel and notified the Mission to avoid the Sayida al-Zainab district. DS Command Center and State Ops were notified by telephone. An EAC convened at 11:30 HRS to review heightened embassy security, accountability of all Mission personnel, and conflicting reports from the press. EAC members agreed there were no indications of a direct threat to Americans or USG interests and directed Consular to send a warden message to Americans to avoid the district. The EAC also decided further information must be developed for accuracy during the day and agreed to re-convene at 1600 local (reported septel).

¶7. (C) Comment: The Syrian government has attempted to cover up previous attacks (e.g., the February 2008 car bomb assassination of Hizballah's Imad Mugniyeh) and may be trying to play down concerns of a terrorist incident in Damascus at the same time as Iranian National Security Advisor Saeed Jalili's visit. We leave it to Department blast experts to assess the photos taken by Emboffs at the scene, but believe the explosion of a bus tire or an air compressor does not appear to explain the ignition that burned the bus and an explosion that shattered windows as far as 200 meters away.

Though the Syrian government's quick cleanup of the scene will make it virtually impossible to investigate further and no one has claimed credit for an "attack," it is too early to rule out politically-motivated violence.

GOODFRIEND